Jim Smith

Dr. George

English 441

1 September 2010

Wenska, Walter P. “Bradford’s Two Histories: Pattern and Pardigm in *Of Plymouth Plantation*.”

*Early American Literature* 13.2 (1978): 151-64. JSTOR. Web. 20 Aug. 2010.

In this article Wenska contends that *Of Plymouth Plantation* “is in fact two histories, written at different times for different reasons and presenting two fundamentally different, paradigmatic responses to the American experience” (152). To support this claim, Wenska presents some interesting historical facts about the writing of this work. First, all of *Plantation* was written retrospectively, though one may not know that from reading it. Although Bradford and the other pilgrims landed in Massachusetts in 1620, Bradford did not begin writing Book I until 1630 while Book II was not started until 1646. Wenska then asks, “Why did [Bradford} bother to write the second book of his history at all?” (152). In order to account for the differences in tone and style, Wenksa compares and contrasts Book I and Book II.

Book I:

* Bradford’s purpose is to impress upon “the Pilgrim’s children the magnitude and significance of their father’s experience” (154).
* A book of beginnings, “first beginings” and “new beginnings.
* It is essentially static, “presenting a series of still-life portraits for the Pilgrim as unsettled and anxious wayfarer.”
* It ends with pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock, appropriate given that this book is about new beginnings. This ending also suggests Bradford’s flair for the dramatic. Further, because this was written retrospectively, Bradford’s drama stems from “downfall” of the Pilgrim’s, their moving away from spiritual matters toward economic/earthly/sinful ones.
* Why did he wait until 1630 to begin Book I? Wenska suggests it was the arrival of new immigrants and the second generation of Pilgrims who no longer valued or respected the grand achievement of the forefathers.

Book II

* Resumed writing in 1644, the year the Pilgrims moved to Nauset. “His resumption of the history in 1644 may be viewed as the pained response to the dissolution of the [Pilgrim] identity…so lovingly and painstakingly established and celebrated in the first book” (156).
* More of a strict, succinct record of events.
* Should not be read as a morbid recounting of the decline of the Pilgrims but more as a means to try to understand this decline. Bradford wrote Book II in order to try to find the mistakes that were made that lead to the corruption of his Utopian society that he and others worked so hard to establish.

So what is the legacy of *Of Plymouth Plantation*? Wenska believes this work serves as a paradigm or model for much of later American works: The Great Gatsby (with Gatsby’s re-examination of his past), Cooper’s The Deerslayer, and Hawthorne’s obsession with his Puritan ancestry, and Faulkner’s obsession with the fall of the South.